Evaluation of Empowerment and Effectiveness

Universal Concepts?

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The question of the effectiveness of health promotion (HP) interventions has captured the attention and energy of a number of researchers, superseding the continual debates on delineating the field of HP vis-à-vis that of public and community health. The central problem is the following: how can we claim that a HP intervention is effective? The informed reader will understand that this includes subject matter which cannot economize on paradigm-oriented reflections, given four separate yet intertwined ontological, epistemological, teleological, and methodological dimensions (Gendron, 2001). The interplay of all these beliefs and values, previously stated by Kuhn, leads to a situation where our vision of the world and our relationship with it conditions both the methodological arsenal useful for considering the effectiveness of an intervention, and our vision of the concept of effectiveness itself.

Some think that HP is not founded upon any disciplinary epistemology, and therefore it is illusionary to develop “evidence rules” (McQueen & Anderson, 2001). Others seek to adapt HP vocabulary to that of bio-medicine (Green & Glasgow, 2006) preferring terms like external validity for example, a richly meaningful term to positivists, to terms such as the nature of transferability of conclusions, one used more frequently by constructivists. These ponderings upon scientific criteria, which are specific to the HP discipline, are echoed in the discipline of program evaluation. The epistemological suggestions given by the defenders of “Real World Evaluation” (Bamberger, Rugh & Mabry, 2006) take up Guba’s and Lincoln’s notorious propositions of a method for evaluating the effectiveness of actions, mirroring those of their colleagues in the health field (Carvalho, Bodstein, Hartz & Matida, 2004; Lock, Nguyen & Zarowsky, 2005). This suggests for example, studying the contribution of certain factors, and not the determinants on the effects of interventions. The issues surrounding the evaluation of HP effectiveness are numerous. Considering the current state of our reflection on the subject, this chapter is centred on two essential concepts.
according to the authors, but which have not been sufficiently addressed in the literature on HP effectiveness.

The first section is dedicated to the proposition linking the methodological and teleological elements of HP, specifically the concept of empowerment, which remains central to HP practice. The debates on this concept are as old as the tools available for the evaluation of HP effectiveness which are still rare. But, if empowerment is a process, it is also an intended outcome of HP the extent to which requires verification in order to determine the effectiveness of HP. How can one then evaluate empowerment as an outcome of an HP program*, recognizing that it is a right of passage which is obligatory in order to demonstrate effectiveness. This section focuses on the quest “for appropriate indicators for health promotion success” (McQueen & Anderson, 2001). The second section features an epistemological and ontological discussion concerning the concept of effectiveness itself. Above and beyond the paradigmatic issues, which imply an understanding of effectiveness, and the manner by which one can account for it scientifically is the core question of the universality of the effectiveness concept.

Before delving into the crux of the subject, it is prudent to state that this chapter does not have any other aim aside from soliciting debate and reflection around HP effectiveness. It consists purely of an attempt to broach the subject in an exploratory fashion. We hope that this effort is understood as a way to share our initial thoughts in order to enrich the existing dialogue and which could eventually be used to advance the state of knowledge through a dialogue between different academic disciplines, cultures, societies and languages.†

### How to Evaluate Empowerment as a Health Promotion Outcome?

We will not reiterate here the multitude of existing discussions regarding the definition of HP, since the literature on this topic is abundant. For the purpose of this chapter, we will therefore adopt a definition proposed by the experts, for it is useful in initiating our discussion:

health promotion is fundamentally about ensuring that individuals and communities are able to assume power to which they are entitled [. . .and] the primary criterion for determining whether a particular initiative should be considered to be health promoting, ought to be the extent to which it involves the process of enabling or empowering individuals or communities (Rootman et al., 2001).

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*The same question is posed by the defenders of “empowerment evaluation” (Ridde, 2006).
†We have, although in vain, made an effort to involve academics from other contexts in the development and drafting of this chapter, in order to ensure a broad representation of the various concepts from a perspective in the Arab-Muslim context and that of West Africa. We hope that this will be possible in a future exercise of this nature.